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## Myths of Second Language Acquisition

Judie Haynes



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### True or False?

Children learn a second language more quickly and easily than adolescents or adults.

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### False

Research has demonstrated that adolescents and adults **perform better than young children** under controlled conditions.

It is **not easier or quicker** for a child to learn a language than it is for an adult.

(Newport, E. (1990). *Maturational constraints on language learning*. *Cognitive Science*, 14, 11-28)

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### How Adolescents and Adults Learn

Older students and adults acquire academic language **more quickly** than children because they have gained knowledge of learning strategies that help them learn a new language.

McLaughlin, B. (1992) *Myths and misconceptions about second language learning: What every teacher needs to unlearn*. National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning, Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics

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### Areas Where Children Excel

Children...

- May outperform adults in the area of pronunciation.
- Can be more motivated than adults.
- Do not have to learn as much to achieve communicative competence.

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### A Conversation with a 7-year-old

Adult: What grade are you in this year?  
7-year-old: Second.

Adult: What is the name of your school?  
7-year-old: Cherry Hill.

Adult: What's your teacher's name this year?  
7-year-old: Mrs. Larkin.

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### Impact on the Classroom

Teachers **should not**

- Expect miraculous results.
- Assume that children have fewer inhibitions than adults.
- Expect that learning a new language is easier for children than it is for adults.

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### True or False?

The more time English language learners spend soaking up English in the classroom, the more quickly they will learn the language.

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**FALSE**

Language is not “soaked up.” The learner must understand the communication that is conveyed by teachers.

This is called **comprehensible input**.

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**Acquiring a New Language Requires...**

- Hearing and understanding messages from teachers and English-speaking classmates.
- Receiving a message that is slightly above current English language level

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**Implications for the Classrooms**

Teachers should...

- Deliver information to ELLs that is just slightly above their English language level.
- Include visuals: graphs, organizers, photographs, and maps to support the language in a lesson.
- Simplify language of instruction without watering down the key concepts.

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### Video Clip

[Visual and Kinesthetic Support](#)

How to Get Started with  
English Language Learners  
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### True or False?

The emotional state  
of the learner can interfere  
with the acquisition of English.

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### True

- Anxiety can block the learner's ability to process information. This is called the **affective filter**.
- Speaking a new language requires that the student take a risk.
- Students who are upset, scared or anxious will raise the affective filter.

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### Implications for the Classroom...

Teachers should:

- create a learning environment that makes ELLs feel welcome and comfortable.
- demonstrate understanding of ELLs' emotional and academic needs.

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### True or False?

Teachers should be concerned about newly arrived ELLs who do not speak any English after six months.

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**FALSE**

New learners of English may...

- Go through a **silent period**.
- Be unable or unwilling to communicate orally in English.
- Remain in this stage for a few days or more than a year.

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**Implications for the Classroom**

English language learners...

- Need time to listen to others talk and to digest what they hear.
- Need time to develop receptive vocabulary.
- Should not be forced to speak before they are ready.

Unwillingness to speak does not mean ELLs are not learning.

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**Implications for the Classroom**

Factors affecting the length of silent period...

- Teacher instruction
- Child's personality
- Child's culture

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**True or False?**

When ELLs can speak English fluently on the playground, they should be able to master their academic work.

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**FALSE**

**Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS)...**

- Comprise the social language students learn to function in the classroom, hallways, cafeteria, and on the school bus.
- Take from one to three years to acquire.

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### Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)

- Refers to the language of formal academic learning.
- Is language of written texts in content areas such as math or science.
- Requires three-seven years or longer to achieve.

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### Implications for the Classroom

Communicative Competence

**Mrs. Perez:** *Why didn't you do your homework, Carlota? You're going to fail this class.*

**Carlota:** *I go visit my aunt. She sick. She got something bad with her heart. My uncle drive my mother and me. We bring aunt some food. When I get home, it too late finish homework.*

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### Implications for the Classroom:

Schools must...

- Be careful of exiting students from language support programs too soon.
- Realize that an ELL who is proficient in social language may not be able to understand the academic content of the classroom.

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### True or False?

Literacy in native language contributes to more rapid acquisition of English.

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### TRUE

The **most significant variable** in how quickly ELLs reach grade-level norms is their level of **literacy in their native language**.

(Thomas & Collier, 1997)

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Adapted from Language, Power & Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire by Cummins, J (2000) Buffalo, NY: Multilingual Matters, Ltd.

This figure illustrates the intersection between a student's primary language and secondary language.

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### In Other Words...

“What we learn in one language transfers into the new language.”

(in Freeman, Y.S. & Freeman, D.E. (1994), *Between Worlds: Access to Second Language Acquisition*, p. 176. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.)

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### Implications for the Classroom...

- Teachers should encourage parents to use their **native language** at home.
- ELLs will acquire new concepts easily in English if they already understand it in their native language.

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### Implications for the Classroom

- Schools should never tell parents that they must speak English at home.
- Children risk losing the ability to communicate well with their family members if parents are told to speak only English at home.

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Myths of Second Language Acquisition	True	False
1. Adolescents and adults learn second languages more quickly and easily than young children.		
2. ELLs do not learn English by soaking it up in the classroom. They need comprehensible input to acquire language.		
3. The emotional state of the learner can interfere with the acquisition of English.		
4. Teachers should NOT be concerned about newly arrived ELLs who do not speak any English after six months.		
5. ELLs who can speak English fluently on the playground, are not necessarily able to master their academic work in the classroom.		
6. Literacy in native language contributes to more rapid acquisition of English.		

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### Questions?

- Use the “questions” panel to submit your questions to the presenter.

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